BLM

United States Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

Determination of NEPA Adequacy

DOI-BLM-CO-S050-2015-0020-DNA

July 2015

North Rim Gunnison Sage-grouse Brood Rearing Habitat Improvement

Location: Gunnison Sage-grouse Area of Environmental Concern,
Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area

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NUMBER: DOI-BLM-CO-S050-2015-0020-DNA

PROPOSED ACTION TITLE: North Rim Gunnison Sage-grouse Brood Rearing Habitat Improvement

LOCATION/LEGAL DESCRIPTION: New Mexico Principle Meridian, T50N R7W Sec 4; T50N R8W Sec 1, 2, & 11; T51N R8W Sec 35 & 36

APPLICANT: USDI, Bureau of Land Management, Uncompahgre Field Office

BACKGROUND: The proposed action would occur within the Gunnison sage-grouse ACEC. The ACEC was designated to specifically manage for a declining population of Gunnison sage-grouse which occur on the north rim of the Gunnison Gorge in the Crawford area.

It is believed that the decline in the Crawford area sage-grouse population reflects a larger decline in the health of the natural landscape in this area.

The proposed action is designed specifically to address declines in habitat suitability; expand the suitable extent of sage-grouse habitat by increasing the grass and forb component in sagebrush communities and preempt the desiccation and down cutting of potential brood rearing habitat within primary nesting habitat.

A. Description of the Proposed Action and any applicable mitigation measures
The proposed action is to continue to implement the North Rim Integrated Vegetation Management Plan; specifically to build structures in low areas between "Range Cone" and "Sec 35" leks, and north of the "Fruitland Mesa 1" lek within the Gunnison Sage-grouse ACEC. This area is considered both nesting and brood rearing habitat for the Gunnison sage-grouse. Approximately 210 small rock structures across 2.9 linear miles and encompassing approx. 8.9 acres) would be built using imported loose rock, Bill Zeedyk's "Let the Water do the Work" methods, and manual labor. The objectives are to reconnect the water table to nearby dry meadows, slow the water flow, sequester sediment, vegetate down-cutting drainages, and

improve sage-grouse brood rearing and nesting habitat[1]. Review and appropriate permitting from the Corp of Engineers will be completed. Design Features from DOI-BLM-CO-S050-2011-0007 EA (listed below under C) will be used in this project.

Additional Design Features for this project include:

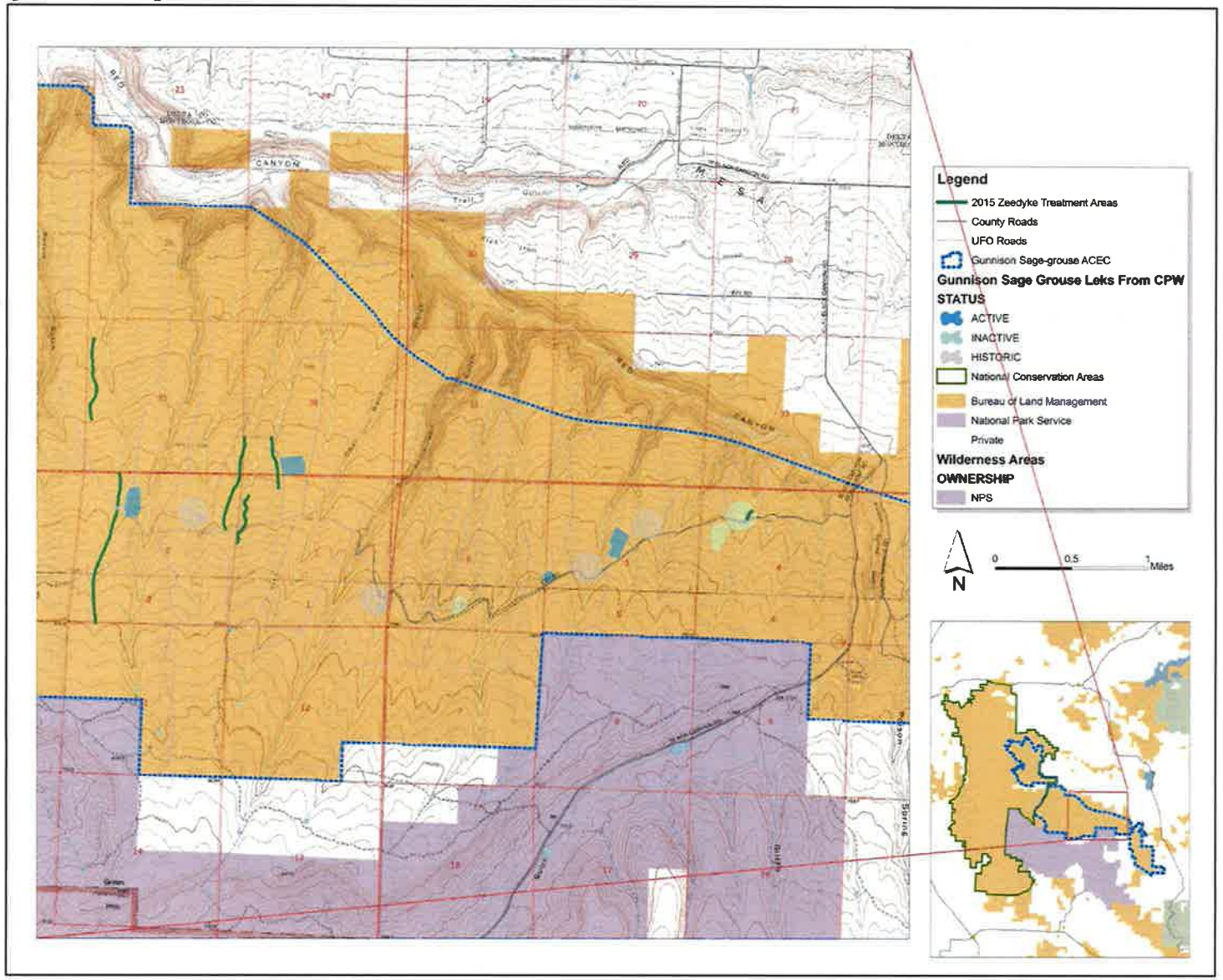
- To reduce disturbance to Gunnison sage-grouse during the breeding/brood rearing period, construction would take place between August 15 and November 30.

- Rock sources for construction of the small structures will be acquired from weed free locations.

- Rock staging areas will be located along existing routes in previously disturbed areas.

[1] Seasonal Habitat Definitions, pg. H-3 *in* Gunnison Sage-grouse Rangewide Steering Committee. 2005. Gunnison sage-grouse rangewide conservation plan. Colorado Division of Wildlife, Denver, CO. Appendix H: GUSG Structural Habitat Guidelines

Map 1. Project Area Map



B. Land Use Plan (LUP) Conformance
Name of Plan: Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area Resource Management Plan
Date Approved: November 5, 2004

The proposed action is in conformance with the applicable LUP because it is specifically provided for in the following LUP decisions:

Decision Number/Page: VEG-C-17 (pg 2-17) & SSS-C-1 (page 2-19), SMA-C-3 & SMA-C-4 (pg 2-26 & 2-27), VEG-4-2, VEG-4-3, VEG-4-4, SSS-4-, (pg 2-81),

Decision Language: BLM will continue to manage habitat for special status species, including listed species, BLM sensitive species, rare endemic species, and other species of special concern.

Public lands in Management Unit 4 (22,200 acres) will be designated and managed as the Gunnison Sage-Grouse ACEC/IBA. Management and protection of the Gunnison sage-grouse and its habitat will be emphasized in this management unit.

This RMP adopts and incorporates the Gunnison Sage-Grouse Conservation Plan, Crawford Area, Colorado (Crawford Sage-Grouse Partnership 1998, and 2011 Update), as part of the management Objectives and direction for Management Unit 4.

As part of the management objectives and direction for Management Unit 4:

- Vegetation treatments will be managed to ensure that appropriate plant communities are present for all life functions for the Gunnison sage-grouse.
- Slightly degraded vegetation will be managed to minimize the source of degradation so that the vegetation community may recover on its own.
- In areas of severely degraded vegetation, restoration treatments will be undertaken.

C. Identify applicable National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documents and other related documents that cover the proposed action.
Name of Document: North Rim Integrated Vegetation Management Plan, Environmental Assessment number DOI-BLM-CO-S050-2011-0007 EA
Date Approved: July, 2011

From the EA page 5 specific language:

Nesting Habitat

Sage-grouse habitat used for nesting, which is generally sagebrush communities within approximately 4 miles of a lek (GSRSC, 2005).

Maintain conditions to provide patches of sagebrush canopy cover and horizontal grass and forb canopy cover sufficient to provide suitable nesting sites. Habitat would provide good hiding and nesting cover and high levels of succulent forbs as well as insects.

- Mechanically remove invading piñon and juniper from nesting habitat, including snags, which act as raptor perches.
- Avoid treatments during nesting season (April 15 to June 30).
- Augment vegetation composition by seeding to restore native grasses and forbs (CDOW 2005, Braun et. al 1977).

- Strive for sagebrush height of 1 - 2.5 feet, 15 - 25% canopy cover.

Brood Rearing Habitat

Sage-grouse brood rearing habitat is habitat used primarily for the rearing of chicks. It is vegetation communities that include sagebrush, agricultural fields, and wet meadows within 6 miles of lek sites. It also includes some mountain shrub habitat.

- Create small (3 - 5 acre) open patches of early and early mid-succession habitat by removing tall, old shrubs, covering no more than 1/3 of the area of the brood rearing habitat.
- Improve grass and forb cover (>15% canopy cover) of taller (>15 inch) grasses and forbs in treated areas.
- Maintain suitable escape cover, shade, and moisture capture areas in close proximity to treated patches. (i.e. sagebrush height >15", 10-15% canopy cover). Some areas should exceed 20% total shrub canopy cover.
- Utilize mechanical treatments and prescribed fire to achieve objectives.
- Avoid treatment during the summer and early fall to avoid negative impacts to grouse.

From the EA page 9 specific language:

Sagebrush Restoration Emphasis Area

The focus of this area is to enhance habitat for Gunnison sage-grouse; restore an appropriate mix of vegetation types and seral stages; and improve ecosystem health. The Sagebrush Restoration Emphasis Area covers approximately 4,400 acres of BLM land.

Vegetation Treatment Objectives:

Treat up to 60-80% (2,600-3,500 acres) of the total acreage over the next 10 years with prescribed fire and mechanical treatments to restore and/or maintain sagebrush habitats.

- Reset aging sagebrush habitats to early seral and seed with an appropriate grass/forb seed mix, so that over the long term (40-60 years) healthy, vigorous sagebrush habitats dominate the area.
- Where sagebrush is present in healthy age classes maintain these areas in early-mid and mid seral stages by removing encroaching piñon and juniper and by interseeding with grasses and forbs.

Use the following criteria to determine whether to treat an area:

- Treat deep soiled sites that were formerly sagebrush that now through succession can be equally considered young piñon juniper stands. These sites must still exhibit herbaceous plant characteristics of sagebrush communities;
- mature sagebrush communities with piñon and juniper encroachment; or
- sagebrush.

Design Features to emphasize for project:

- To protect breeding Gunnison sage-grouse, surface disturbing activities shall not occur from March 15 through July 15 in mountain shrub and sagebrush communities.

This time frame protects both the birds on the leks as well as birds that are nesting and brood rearing.

- To minimize impacts on big game, sensitive species, and migratory birds, it is recommended that treatments in sagebrush and mountain shrub communities occur between August 1 and November 30.
- All heavy equipment (private and BLM) will be power washed before entering public lands. This includes all lowboys hauling heavy equipment and fire equipment.
- Treatment areas will be inventoried for noxious and invasive weeds prior to treatment.
- All noxious and invasive weeds will be treated before and after treatment has occurred.
- Monitor for noxious and invasive weeds post treatment for up to 3 years.

D. NEPA Adequacy Criteria

1. Is the new proposed action a feature of, or essentially similar to, an alternative analyzed in the existing NEPA document(s)? Is the project within the same analysis area, or if the project location is different, are the geographic and resource conditions sufficiently similar to those analyzed in the existing NEPA document(s)? If there are differences, can you explain why they are not substantial?

The proposed action is in direct conformance as stated above. The project falls within the sagebrush restoration emphasis area established in the North Rim Integrated Vegetation Management Plan EA. The goals of the treatment are the same as stated within the North Rim EA (moisture retention and improved Gunnison sage-grouse brood-rearing and nesting habitat), however new information has provided a less invasive method to meet those goals. Additionally, this method has been used across a much larger area of the Gunnison Basin Gunnison sage-grouse habitat, with results of improved vegetation conditions relative to brood rearing habitat (CO-036-98-024 EA and associated DNAs).

2. Is the range of alternatives analyzed in the existing NEPA document(s) appropriate with respect to the new proposed action, given current environmental concerns, interests, and resource values?

Yes, the alternatives analyzed were appropriate given that the new proposed action is a less invasive methodology to meet the same goals of improving brood-rearing and nesting habitat in the same project area as the North Rim Integrated Vegetation Management Plan EA. Additionally, the methodology to be used is the same as previously used in the Gunnison Basin area for sage-grouse habitat improvement.

3. Is the existing analysis valid in light of any new information or circumstances (such as, rangeland health standard assessment, recent endangered species listings, updated lists of BLM-sensitive species)? Can you reasonably conclude that new information and new circumstances would not substantially change the analysis of the new proposed action?

Yes, the existing analysis is valid given that the methodology to be used is less invasive than that analyzed in the North Rim EA, and as stated BLM would "apply adaptive management to future projects to address problems that may have resulted from previous treatments" (pg 3). The source

EA proposed tree removal to reduce the uptake of moisture and competition with understory vegetation components needed for brood-rearing/nesting habitat. New information has come forward through work in the Gunnison Basin population of the Gunnison sage-grouse. The Zeedyke methodology is a much less invasive technique to reconnect the water table, increase soil moisture and increase brood-rearing/nesting vegetation characteristics that are limited within this population (riparian vegetation, tall grasses and forbs). Within the Gunnison Basin population, thousands of these small structures have been implemented, with excellent results for habitat improvement[2]. This proposed action meets the intent and objectives of the North Rim EA. Mechanical treatment is the placement of small rock structures in drainages to slow the movement of precipitation, improve soil moisture, which will facilitate for the development of riparian vegetation characteristics, and maintain green grass and forbs later into the breeding season to provide habitat for sage-grouse chicks.

Gunnison sage-grouse status has changed from Proposed Endangered to final listing decision of Threatened. The footprint of the proposed project is approximately 8.9 acres. Ongoing movement research with USGS of GPS PTT tagged local grouse have provided very good information on the movements of this population, and the time frames that they spend in various portions of the habitat. With design features to exclude construction during critical times (March 15 through July 15), the small footprint of the project, and the manual labor for construct of the small structures, the project may effect, but is not likely to adversely affect Gunnison sage grouse[3]. Consultation was conducted with USFWS and concurrence was received for **may effect, not likely to adversely affect** Gunnison sage grouse[4].

4. Are the direct, indirect, and cumulative effects that would result from implementation of the new proposed action similar (both quantitatively and qualitatively) to those analyzed in the existing NEPA document?

Yes, all direct, indirect, and cumulative effects are expected to be smaller in nature than those analyzed in the North Rim EA, and similar to those described in the Gunnison Basin EA. Negative impacts from this action are expected to be much shorter in duration. Positive impacts to vegetation characteristics are expected to be much slower in nature than those analyzed in the North Rim EA.

The proposed action is expected to have a net cumulative positive effect for sage-grouse and other sage obligate species, as there is an increase in currently highly limited habitat (riparian, wet meadow) for this population.

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[2] TNC. 2013. Enhancing Ecosystem Resilience of Riparian/Wetland Habitats in the Upper Gunnison Basin: Phase II. Final Report for Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District by The Nature Conservancy and the Gunnison Climate Working Group, December 20, 2013.

[3] BLM. 2015. Request for concurrence that the North Rim Gunnison Sage-grouse Brood-rearing Habitat Improvement project (2015-0020 DNA), Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area is not likely to adversely affect Gunnison sage-grouse (*Centrocercus minimus*) or critical habitat. USFWS concurrence 6/4/2015

[4] USFWS. 2015. Concur Not Likely to Adversely Affect. June 4, 2015.

5. Are the public involvement and interagency review associated with existing NEPA document(s) adequate for the current proposed action?

Yes, scoping for the subject EA revealed no written comments in opposition to the project. Colorado Parks and Wildlife, the Crawford Sage-grouse working group, and US Geological Survey have reviewed the proposed action and subject EA and are in strong support for the project.

E. Persons/Agencies /BLM Staff Consulted

Name	Title	Resource/Agency Represented
Nate Seward	Terrestrial Biologist	Colorado Parks and Wildlife
Doug Homan	Coordinator	Crawford Sage-grouse Working Group
Doug Orin	Researcher	USGS
Glade Hadden	Archeologist	Cultural Resources/BLM
Ken Holsinger	Biologist	Vegetation/BLM
Carrie Sheata	Biologist	Corps of Engineers
Kurt Broderdorp	Biologist	USFWS

The following are agencies/entities that were consulted for the North Rim EA:

- Black Canyon Audubon Society
- Black Canyon Land Trust
- Colorado Parks and Wildlife
- Colorado State University – Extension Service
- Crawford Gunnison Sage-Grouse Working Group
- Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture –Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests, Paonia Ranger District
- Grazing Permittees
- Local Private Landowners
- National Park Service –Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park and Curecanti National Recreation Area
- Natural Resources Conservation Service, Delta Conservation District
- U.S. Geological Survey
- Western Area Power Administration
- Interested Members of the Public
- Uncompahgre Plateau Project

REMARKS:

Cultural Resources: Most of the Cultural Resource inventory for the larger integrated project has been completed at both Class II and Class III levels. The remaining acreage for the project has been exempted from inventory requirements under the provision of BLM manual 8110.23B1 and 8110.23B3. No further work is required.

Native American Religious Concerns: There are none known for this area. If any such Sacred Sites and/or Traditional Cultural Properties are discovered through tribal consultation, oral

history and/or inventory, consultation with the appropriate tribes will be implemented and the sites will be avoided.

Threatened and Endangered Species: With the exception for Gunnison sage-grouse, no federally listed or BLM sensitive species are known to inhabit or derive important use of the proposed project area. With design features, the project **may effect, not likely to adversely affect** Gunnison sage grouse[3].

Conclusion

Based on the review documented above, I conclude that this proposal conforms to the applicable land use plan, and that the NEPA documentation fully covers the proposed action and constitutes BLM's compliance with the requirements of the NEPA.

Signature of Project Lead Melissa S. Siders Date 14 July 2015

Signature of NEPA Coordinator [signature] Date 7/15/15

Signature of the Responsible Official [signature]
Barbara Sharrow
Field Manager, Uncompahgre Field Office

Date 7-17-15

Note: The signed Conclusion on this Worksheet is part of an interim step in the BLM's internal decision process and does not constitute an appealable decision. However, the lease, permit, or other authorization based on this DNA is subject to protest or appeal under 43 CFR Part 4 and the program-specific regulations.